The Big Read: Streaming — the good, the bad and the ugly side of an outdated policy

Experts said that overall, subject-based banding will be beneficial in the sense that groups of students will no longer be tarred with the same brush but will not solve the issue of social divide.

File photo of students in Singapore. (Photo: TODAY)

SINGAPORE: Mr Fathul Hanif Ariffin recalled that as a student at Hougang Secondary School, co-curricular lessons were the only time when Express and Normal stream students had a chance to bond. But that did not exactly take place.

Verbal grenades were lobbed at the Normal stream students instead.

"The Express students would make snarky remarks that Normal stream students are not as smart as them or we're slow learners," recalled Mr Fathul, who was in the Normal (Academic) stream at the school from 2008 to 2012.

Teachers, too, looked down on students like him. As his teachers at the time taught both Express and Normal stream students, they would make comparisons.

"There were times when my classmates and I didn't do well, they would say, 'Don't you want to go to Express? Do you want to spend an extra year?'", said Mr Fathul, referring to the fact that Normal (Academic) students can do a fifth year in secondary education to take the GCE O-Level examination. Though the teachers perhaps intended to motivate students, such comments had the opposite effect and came across as "condescending", said Mr Fathul, who is now 23.

It gave the impression that Express stream students were "more superior", he added, and that Normal stream students "could not go far in life".

Mr Fathul went on to Temasek Polytechnic, where he was later offered a bond-free scholarship to pursue his undergraduate studies in communications and media studies at the University of Western Australia. He is currently a first-year student there.

His experience as well as that of others — including Dr Felix Tan, a former Normal stream student who now lectures at SIM Global Education — highlight the downside of streaming.

Pigeonholing students demoralises them, while being put in a stream considered to be of "lower standing" carries a stigma that becomes self-limiting, education experts, past and present Members of Parliament (MPs) as well as former students said.

A student completing an assignment. (Photo: AFP/Frederick Florin)

Even government leaders had acknowledged that the adverse impact on students' self-esteem is among the pitfalls of streaming.

But the effects of streaming are not exactly clear-cut, those interviewed said.

Former Normal stream students, including Mr Fathul, felt streaming enabled them to learn at their own pace.

The perennial debate on streaming took a decisive turn on Tuesday when Education Minister Ong Ye Kung announced that the system would be replaced by subject-based banding by 2024.

It marked the beginning of the end to a contentious policy after a similar move was made to do away with primary school streaming in 2008.

Those interviewed said the jury is still out as to whether the school streaming system has been a success or failure.

For a while, streaming did serve its purpose, especially during Singapore's nation-building years. It succeeded in cutting down drop-out rates and kept students in schools, they added.

As the country prospered, however, the inequality gap grew.

On top of that, the rigidity of streaming coupled with the growth of educational pathways and students' changing aspirations made the system more untenable.

In short, streaming had become outdated, they noted.

Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar, an MP for Ang Mo Kio Group Representation Constituency, recently spoke in Parliament of how her Normal (Technical) students felt demoralised.

Dr Intan was previously a secondary school teacher for six years, and is now an Assistant Professor at the Singapore Institute of Technology under its Design and Specialised Business cluster.

Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar speaking in Parliament on Nov 20, 2018.

She reiterated that streaming has served its purpose.

"It was well-intentioned and did show results," said Dr Intan, who is also the deputy chair of the government parliamentary committee for education.

"But ultimately, when society becomes more well-educated and more affluent, we aspire for an education system and landscape that can cater to differences and which can be customised to our diverse needs and expectations. Streaming is not able to provide that."

HOW STREAMING CAME TO SCHOOLS

Before there was self-government, schools were divided along vernacular languages.

After the People's Action Party (PAP) formed the first government of self-governing Singapore in 1959, it revamped the education system, starting with the introduction of the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in 1960.

Three years later, a common education system was introduced — there would be six years of primary followed by four years of secondary education as well as two years in pre-university.

Streaming could be traced back to the 1960s.

Before 1969, students were channelled into academic, technical and vocational schools at the end of their primary education.

The Government went on to introduce the Revised Primary Education System and the Revised Secondary Education System in 1976 and 1978, respectively.

This is "to cater for human differences and to reduce attrition".

Under those systems, students who failed in primary and secondary schools were channeled to vocational courses.

These details were revealed in former Deputy Prime Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee's landmark report — better known as the Goh report — published in 1979. It detailed the problems of Singapore's education system then.

It was in this report where Dr Goh, then the Education Minister, raised the need for a proper streaming system to reduce the drop-out rate.

Primary students would be streamed at the end of Primary 3 into either the normal bilingual, extended bilingual or monolingual course. This took effect in 1981 and was later replaced with the labels EM1, EM2 and EM3.

Secondary schools would have the Special, Express and Normal streams.
Mr Goh said in his report that a single curriculum "does not take into consideration differences in absorption capacities and rates of learning of the pupils". He added:

This rigidity of the system tends to favour above-average pupils, penalising the below-average pupils and slow learners. This resulted in high failure rates. These high failure rates could be reduced if the education system is flexible enough to cater for the different categories of pupils.

File photo of students. (File photo: Ernest Chua/TODAY)

Though he acknowledged concerns over streaming, he pointed out that "much of the prejudice" against it "derives from an egalitarian philosophy fashionable in the western world" after World War II. And this philosophy "partly rests on a prejudice against the pursuit of excellence".

He reiterated the need for streaming again during a four-day parliamentary debate over the motion of Revised Structure of Education in Parliament in March 1979.

While streaming was a "beastly thing to do", it was necessary to advance the education system, he stressed.

Over the decades, streaming did reduce the drop-out rate — from 30 to 40 per cent when the system was introduced to 5.3 per cent in 1997. It fell to 3.7 per cent in 2002 and now stands at less than 1 per cent.

From 1994, further changes were made to primary and secondary streaming.

At the secondary level, students were later streamed into Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) courses. Over at the primary level, the EM1 and EM2 streams were merged in 2004, and in 2008, streaming was completely scrapped and replaced with subject-based banding.
Since 1979, however, the debate over streaming has raged on till today.

Memorable ones included the intense parliamentary exchange in March 1981 between former PAP MP Dr Tan Cheng Bock and then Education Minister Dr Tony Tan.

The MP questioned the psychological impact of streaming and whether "children of very high intellect in special schools where they only play and work together" could relate to the "less academically endowed".

Dr Tony Tan responded that streaming enables each student to progress at a pace suited to his or her ability. It was too early then to "speculate on its long-term effects" on Singapore's society and he did not see "the danger" that the MP had alluded to.

In 2014, MP Denise Phua called for removal of both PSLE and streaming. There should instead be a 10-year through-train education system.

Member of Parliament Denise Phua. (Photo: Jeremy Long)

Last week, MP Louis Ng pointed out that students are not just streamed based on academic results, as students from Normal streams tend to have lower socioeconomic status.

A SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Calvin Cheng, who has cautioned against entirely removing the streaming system, pointed to its success in reducing the drop-out rate and improving the quality of education. As a result, Singapore is now an "educational powerhouse" that has consistently topped global rankings, he noted.

On the other hand, former MP Inderjit Singh described streaming as a failure due to its psychological impact and how it "widened the class divide".

The intent was not wrong. We focused on not slowing down good students and paid less attention to allow slow students to catch up," he added.

Others, however, said there is no clear-cut answer on whether streaming has worked or not.

Dr Intan said it would be too simplistic to describe streaming as a success or failure.

Associate Professor Jason Tan, from the National Institute of Education's policy and leadership studies department, said that just like any policy, the Government has to constantly juggle conflicting priorities.

"It depends on what their values and priorities are at any one point in time, and it's tough to make everyone equally happy," he added.

Still, the majority of those interviewed agreed on one thing: Streaming succeeded at a time when it was needed. Over time, though, it became outdated due to several factors.

Dr Kirpal Singh, director of the centre for educational leadership at the Training Vision Institute, pointed out that streaming was introduced at a time when the playing field was very much levelled as the majority of Singaporeans were still poor.

Then, parents had a "simple mindset" where they "just wanted their children to get an education, finish it quickly and go to work to supplement household income".

As Singapore's economy grew over time and its citizens became affluent, some parents had more resources to help their children do well in schools. For instance, by providing tuition.

Slowly, the inequality gap widened. And streaming, said Dr Singh, could have exacerbated the divide as it allowed students from richer households to advance faster, while those from lower-income households lagged behind.

Government statistics showed that from 2014 to 2018, 69 per cent of secondary school students who received assistance from the Ministry of Education's (MOE) financial assistance scheme came from the Normal streams.

Another factor why streaming has run its course is because the system is "overly rigid", said Assoc Prof Tan.
It did not allow much inter-stream mobility and instead "froze students into boxes".

File photo of secondary school students in Singapore.

Streaming also did not have sophisticated mechanisms to recognise students' strengths in different subject areas and not many subject options were given to students, said Assoc Prof Tan.

He cited, for instance, how Normal (Technical) students are given vocational-type subjects, indicating that they could only go to certain post-secondary institutions and perform certain types of jobs.

Professor David Chan, the director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at Singapore Management University, said that streaming did not take into account certain elements that can be found in the subject-based banding system.

One of them is that streaming relies too much on general instead of specific academic abilities. As such, "we miss out the important information on the profile of strengths and weaknesses of the diverse specific abilities", said Prof Chan.

So, a student with great potential and ability in a specific subject but does not do well in other subjects could end up in the lower-ability Normal stream.

Meanwhile, another student who does reasonably well in all subjects but outstanding in none could end up in the higher-ability Express stream, he added.

"The problem is exacerbated if the Normal stream environment is associated with other factors that are not conducive to the development of the student's specific abilities in particular subjects and are overall demotivating for the student to perform academically," said Prof Chan.

Such rigidity does not help amid changing aspirations, said those interviewed. And students wanting to break out of the paths dictated for them to pursue growing job opportunities made streaming outdated, they added.

One other factor that made streaming "redundant" is the recognition that students have diverse strengths, as well as the opening up of educational pathways.

Education experts pointed out that this was reflected in the scrapping of primary school streaming. In addition, the MOE has ramped up efforts to open up routes for Normal stream students to polytechnics and place more emphasis on aptitude admissions.

Dr Intan said that the emphasis on different abilities and skills through the SkillsFuture movement, for instance, paved the way for the full implementation of subject-based banding. "The abolition of streaming is the next natural step," she added.

Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung at the SkillsFuture Fellowships and Employer Awards ceremony in 2017. (Photo: Deborah Wong)

WHAT'S NEXT AFTER STREAMING IS 'SLAYED'

Former NMP Cheng stressed that removing streaming will not solve the issue of social divide.
On the point that streaming has contributed to, or exacerbated, a class divide, he said critics had got the "cause and effect wrong".

Children's socioeconomic backgrounds contribute to their different academic abilities. It is not the other way around, he said.

As such, whether streaming exists or not, the solution should be to help children of poorer families perform in school.

"Not streaming kids isn't going to suddenly do away with socioeconomic differences later in life. Many other things determine whether one succeeds in life, including luck," he added.

Scrapping streaming also will not address growing concerns over elitism and the effectiveness of meritocracy, said Mr Cheng, who is an entrepreneur.

Social stratification and elitism are complex issues that cannot be blamed on the education system alone.

Dr Intan echoed a similar point, saying that streaming, for all intents and purposes, is not meant to socially divide. It is seen as an "efficient way of sorting students into groups for efficient teaching and learning".

"However, we cannot extricate ourselves from our social interactions and social perceptions," she noted.

"Labelling and stigmatisation are the unintended outcomes of streaming, largely due to our natural tendency to categorise and create stereotypes based on our own personal biases."

She therefore argued that "it is our beliefs and actions that stratify us, not streaming alone".

While there is a need to ensure students achieve success, the solution is not to scrap streaming or dumb down examinations. There is still a need to pursue excellence, said Mr Cheng.

The key, he added, is to widen the different definitions of success. "I think we attribute too much of life's success and failures to academic achievement and streaming."

File photo of secondary school students. (Photo: TODAY)

Scrapping the labels Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) does not mean streaming has been abolished, said education experts. In fact, doing that means that streaming has only been partially removed.

Elite schools are unaffected by the move as they only have a single stream, said Assoc Prof Tan. There could be a situation where the divide between elite and non-elite schools will be more pronounced, he added.

Mr Cheng quipped: "It's now the top 10 per cent and the rest … You cannot un-stream away differences. Policy cannot make equal what nature has made unequal."

There is also the question of whether the tuition industry will be affected after secondary school streaming is scrapped. But the experts expect the impact to be minimal.

Dr Singh said that parents still rely on tuition as a form of "extra security" as they still feel the pressure from perceived competition.

Implementation of the subject-based banding also raises questions on how students will be assessed when it comes to post-secondary institutions or even when they enter the workforce.

Assoc Prof Tan pointed out that though the new system sort of provides "equal opportunities", it "does not promise everyone equal outcomes".

Entry into junior colleges, he pointed out, should remain rigorous as their sole purpose is to prepare students for university education, and colleges are not at all vocationally oriented.

When it comes to the workforce though, experts said the new system would not have much of an impact since students would receive similar certifications albeit with different subject combinations. Mr Cheng said that it should not affect one's employment assessment as an individual's highest qualification should render the one before that irrelevant, as in other developed countries. Experts said that overall, subject-based banding will be beneficial in the sense that groups of students will no longer be tarred with the same brush.

While many have described the changes as long overdue, Dr Singh said: "The MOE or the Government should not have to apologise or be embarrassed for making such changes only now. We are entering a more and more complex world, where no nation has come up with an ideal education system."

Source: CNA/sl